

## Secrets Behind the Southern Illinois Peaches

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Many people do not know the secrets behind the luscious peaches of southern Illinois. They simply come to enjoy those sweet peaches without realizing that behind them are Mexican migrant workers living in Union and Jackson counties. These workers have a tradition of strenuous labor in return for minimal earnings. The Mexicans also have to face discrimination, poverty, and lack of education. Most have less than a sixth-grade education. These workers came from Mexico to southern Illinois during World War II. Through the years migrants sought to improve their benefits, education, living conditions, and fight against discrimination.

Some Mexicans came to the United States as early as the 1840s. However, it was not until the beginning of World War II that a steady flow of Mexican immigrants arrived. The war created a shortage of workers in the United States and Mexicans saw job opportunities as a way out of their poverty. When the migrant population began to increase, the need for accommodations grew. Orchard owners asked the Farm Bureau to construct migrant camps. However, the Farm Bureau suggested operating a tent rental service so that the growers could have their workers on their own land. The Farm Bureau provided working toilets and drinking water. Over the decades the immigration rate continued to increase and by the late 1900s there were more than 117,200 Mexicans in Illinois. It was then the state with the largest number of Mexicans in the Midwest. Today out of the thousand farm workers in Union and Jackson County area, 80 percent are Spanish speakers.

At first the migrants were welcomed, as evidenced in the April 5, 1879 *Jonesboro Gazette*: "pickers are already coming in at some of the largest growers in such numbers as to make business quite lively ..., in the way of dry goods and groceries". By the 1880s many people greeted them as a nuisance. The *Jonesboro Gazette*, *Alto Pass News* and *The Cobden News* for May 14, 1887, complained "The tramp pickers are about as numerous as usual, and, as is always the case, are ... begging from house to house for something to eat." This did not stop the migrants. The Americans saw their painful poverty but seemed to treat their condition as a fact of nature.

The goal for migrant parents was and is to give their children a better life. The goal for migrant children is to work very hard so their parents' hard work is not in vain. The story of Evelia Nava, illustrates this. She came to the United States at the age of 18 as an immigrant with her brother. Today her family is very poor and she has been working in the fields for as long as she can remember. Nava describes her decision to immigrate by saying, "I wasn't in search of the American Dream; rather I wanted to work very hard and earn money to help my family economically; I want them to have a better life." The job search led her to Cobden, where she works in an orchard. The housing conditions for migrant laborers are frequently substandard. While Illinois has a migrant labor camp code, which requires housing unit inspections, it only applies to sites with four or more families or ten or more workers. Not covered are the residences of many migrant farm workers who must find their own housing. For seasonal workers who do not live in labor camps, affordable housing is a critical need. The lack of affordable housing is almost impossible to surmount for families who do not have adequate income for rent. By living in these conditions the threat of recurring infectious diseases, such as tuberculosis, is aggravated

by crowding in migrant housing and poor sanitation. For Evelia, work is not the hardest part. She has not seen her family in eight years because travel is very expensive. This is common in many migrant families. Almost all of the migrants suffer from the pain of not being close to their families, especially when a tragedy strikes the family. The pain is mutual because the family that stays in Mexico also suffers.

Another illustration of problems for migrants can be seen with the Carmona family. They came to Southern Illinois seeking jobs. The mother stayed in Mexico with the younger children while the oldest came with the father. A tragedy hit, says Esmeraldo Carmona, "when my father got sick and couldn't work any more. My father returned to Mexico. At fifteen I arrived in Cobden and lived with my brother and eighteen people in a two bedroom apartment." Being in a new place, Esmeraldo could not understand the language or find better accommodations. There has been some progress with the creation of programs like the Illinois Migrant Council, the main purpose of which is to provide services to migrant families. The Migrant Health Service also helps with scheduling doctors' appointments providing prescriptions for five dollars. These are all steps that the Department of Agriculture has taken to increase the benefits for the migrant laborers. However, the conditions for the laborers are still poor. There is limited sanitation, and there is one portable bathroom for thirty workers. The workers eat their meals contaminated with pesticides.

The Carmona family worked in the orchards from early spring until November when the season was over. In the early spring they pruned the trees, harvested and packed the products. During the orchards' busy season, the migrants worked from twelve to fifteen hours a day with an hour off for lunch. Even though migrants worked long hours, they did not earn much money. The little money that they have saved was used to get through the winter or migrate in the search of another job.

Migrants are considered the most disadvantaged social group in the United States with an estimated seventy-three percent of migrant farm workers. Migrants also face the highest dropout rate among the Hispanic-American ethnic groups. Migrant high school dropout rates range from forty-five percent to sixty-five percent, which is almost double the national average dropout rate. The city of Cobden is trying to help with these problems by founding programs like the Amigos, which is made up of Hispanic children who cannot speak English. Amigos provides the children with Spanish-speaking teachers. It also creates classes that are taught in both in English and Spanish. Cobden also provides summer school for migrant children. The summer school provides a form of childcare while parents work for long hours in the fields. It also has classes to help the children reach the same learning level as the rest of their Cobden schoolmates.

Things are still hard for migrant laborers and their families. New programs are helping these working people but much remains to be done both with housing and education. The community of Cobden is trying to help by providing education to migrant children as well as jobs for their parents. Immigrants now have jobs; they might not be the best but it is a start for a better future. Migrant laborers do a variety of jobs such as picking peaches, which people in the community buy without realizing the hard work that it took to pick them. Migrant workers need the help of the community in order for them to provide delicious fruits and vegetables in southern Illinois. [From: Jane Adams, *The Transformation of Rural Life*; Warren D. Anderson, *Ethnic Identity and Migration Among Mexican Wage Laborers in Southern Illinois*; Carol Huang, *The Political Economy of Migrant Education from 1968 to 2000 – A Policy Reflection*; *Jonesboro Journal Cobden Local News*, May 14, 1887; *Jonesboro Journal, Alto Pass Local News*, April 5, 1879; David E. Schob, *Hired Hands and Plowboys Farm Labor in the Midwest*

*1815-60*; Student historian's Interview with Esmeraldo Carmona, Sept. 6, 2003; Student historian's interview with Fernando Chirez, Sept. 5, 2003; Student historian's interview with Karen Flam, Sept. 13, 2003; Student historian's interview with Jerry Kiuder, Sept. 2, 2003; Student historian's interview with Mary Montalvan, Sept. 9, 2003; Student historian's interview with Evelia Nava, Sept. 6, 2003; Student historian's interview with Wayne Randleman, Sept. 13, 2003; Student historian's interview with Gloria Reek, Sept. 11, 2003; Student historian's interview with Martha Sots, Sept. 11, 2003.]